

Saint Ignatius and the Bible

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We all read and understand and use the Bible in the light of our personal experiences and in the context of the society in which we live. St. Ignatius did the same. His experiences were particular to him as ours are to us, and sixteenth century Spain and France and Rome provided a far different context than twentieth century America. On the one hand, we have today far more detailed knowledge of the text of Scripture and of the contexts in which its various parts were written than any one in the time of Ignatius had. On the other hand, stories of the life of Jesus were woven into the fabric of daily life in his time, just as were stories of the saints, with an immediacy that we can not easily imagine. The loom on which those stories were woven was the church, and the church, too, occupied a place in the day-to-day lives of people far more pervasively than we can imagine.

We do not know when Ignatius first read the Old or New Testament. We do know, however, that if he read it in his early years, he could not have done so in Spanish. Because of the Inquisition's prohibitions, the first printed Catholic Spanish translation of the whole New Testament was only published in 1793. In addition, whatever knowledge of Latin he may have had in his early years was so rudimentary that he could not have read the scriptures in that language. He would, of course, have heard Scripture used in preaching in his home parish, and stories from both Old and New Testaments told as part of the religious heritage of the time. But in all likelihood those stories would have been

mixed up with some of the plentiful legends that supplied more vivid details than Scripture itself provided for the life of our Lord, and for the actions of the great figures of the Old and New Testament, from Adam and Eve on to the Apostles.

Ignatius' first biographical reference to Scripture comes in his "Reminiscences" (usually called his "Autobiography") where he speaks of reading the famous and immensely popular life of Christ by the medieval Carthusian, Ludolf of Saxony, while he was convalescing at Loyola from the battle wounds he had suffered of Pamplona. Ludolph's *Life of Christ* drew on the Scriptures themselves, but it was also filled with centuries-old legends about the life of Jesus.

The place in which best to look for the relation of Ignatius and the Bible is his writings, and among them especially the *Spiritual Exercises*. It is immediately striking that in the Exercises all of the specific chapter and verse references to Scripture are taken, with only two brief exceptions, from the four gospels. If these were for Ignatius the most authoritative sources of knowledge of the events of our Lord's life, they were not the only sources. Anyone familiar with the Exercises will note that he includes such supposed events as the "compassion" that Mary felt at the circumcision "because of the blood which was flowing from her son, "or the designation of the Magi as "Three Kings," or, after the Resurrection, his appearance to his mother before he appeared to anyone else. At that point Ignatius says, almost with a hint of impatience in his voice, "Although this is not stated in Scripture, still it is considered as understood by the statement that he appeared to many others. For Scripture supposes that we have understanding, as it is written, 'Are even you without understanding?' [Matt. 15:16]" As if anyone with any sense would know that that is what a good son would do!

In the first and second "Weeks" of the Exercises, a host of stories already traditional in the Middle Ages intermingles with biblical details, stories such as how the angels were created, how some

sinned through pride and were banished to hell, how Adam was created on the plain of Damascus. In stories connected with the nativity, "Mary [is] seated on an ass together with Joseph and a servant girl leading an ox." Sixteenth century nobleman that he was, Ignatius might not have been able even to imagine Mary and Joseph and Jesus, however poor they were, without at least that one little servant girl.

When we turn to the almost seven thousand extant letters of Ignatius, references to and quotations from the Bible are often there. How many letters are solely his and how many are due to his extraordinarily capable secretary, Juan Polanco, is not clear. But, in the very early letters that we know Ignatius himself wrote, there are very few direct references to the Bible even though they are letters of a directly spiritual nature. The one major exception is in an early letter to his brother at Loyola where he frequently cites St. Paul.

In the Jesuit Constitutions, Ignatius set down very briefly the relationship of the Society and its works to Sacred Scripture. Scripture, along with other branches of knowledge, were part of the learning whose purpose was "to help the souls of its own members and those of their fellowmen." The original languages of Scripture and the languages of its translations were to be studied for the same purposes and to defend the version of the Bible approved by the church. Preachers and lecturers were to study "the Gospel passages which occur throughout the year." The profession of final vows required "sufficient learning in humane letters and the liberal arts and, beyond that, in scholastic theology and Sacred Scripture."

These facts about Ignatius' use of the Bible have long been well known and noted. The attitude that underlay his relation to the Bible has been the subject of a variety of opinions. They are too many and, in some instances, too detailed for an article as brief as this. One of the more recent such

views is that Ignatius' real center of interest "is not in the biblical text as divinely inspired writings and thus as distinct from other Christian writings, but immediately in the great personal events or mysteries which constitute the Christian *historia*."¹ According to Father Martin Palmer of the Institute of Jesuit Sources, Ignatius was not so much "a man of ideas or of words or of books, not even of the sacred books of Christianity." Books were important to him, of course, but writings, his own and others, and even the writings of Sacred Scripture were a means to action, to apostolic activity, to focusing upon actual persons doing specific things, "God, Jesus Christ, the good and evil spirits, the retreatant, the director, princes, Jesuits, all those who engaged in significant interaction." For Ignatius, and preeminently in the Spiritual Exercises, something is always happening. Most importantly, it is of ultimate significance, for myself, for others, for the whole human race. What is happening is the drama of God's continuing creation of all reality and God's undying love for me, fully shown forth in Christ. How do I respond to that deepest reality? What is my active role in God's great work in Christ? We know that great work, of course, in and through Scripture. We know therein God's intention for us. We know, further, how it has become manifest through the centuries in the Christian community's understanding of and living out of that intention of Christ's loving lordship of this world.

In such a dramatic vision of all reality, Ignatius asks himself and would have all others ask themselves, "What do you want of me, Lord."

The world in which Ignatius was born, grew up, lived and worked had, among both Catholics and among Protestants of the Reformation too, a far more unified view of all reality than we have today. So much of that vision came out of the Bible and out of all the traditions and stories that grew up around the Bible and that were interwoven into the very fabric of people's lives. To construct and

¹ Martin E. Palmer, SJ., "The Spiritual Exercises and the Bible," *CIS: Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, xxvi-2, 1995, pp. 28-39

impart such a unifying and compelling vision of reality for our fragmented world of today we will need to call upon the Bible and the focused intensity of Ignatius and, hardest of all, our own imaginations attuned to the needs of a new century as Ignatius' imagination was attuned to those of his century.
